



Conference Paper

'New Metropolis' As a Foundation for Contemporary Russian Urban Culture

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Abstract

The article explores and defines the category of 'new metropolis'. Socio-cultural features of the 'new metropolis' are: sustained economic importance of a large-scale production (industry) and its impact on the city's social and cultural life; self-sufficient city mentality; an attempt to realize in practice the concept of the so-called '24-hour city'. The author believes that this form of socio-cultural organization, despite its 'contiguity', provides conditions necessary for the city as a successful socio-cultural project.

Keywords: metropolis, Yekaterinburg, city, urban studies, urban culture

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1. Introduction

During one of the meetings of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF-2017), Alexei Kudrin, ex-Finance Minister and Head of the Center for Strategic Research Foundation, talked about the need to create 15-20 urban agglomerations within Russia, which would potentially become the so-called 'drivers' of development of modern Russia. The similarities between sociocultural and economic characteristics of the cities that will potentially become the centers of agglomerations, means that we need a new term for such cities. Here we propose the concept of 'new metropolis'. We consider among such cities mostly administrative centers of the Russian Federation constituents, with the population that had exceeded one million either in late Soviet period or during the recent years. Among these 'new metropolises' are such cities as: Yekaterinburg, Novosibirsk, Nizhny Novgorod, Kazan, Chelyabinsk, Krasnoyarsk, Omsk, Samara, Rostov-on-Don and others.

We believe that this type of cities in contemporary Russia occupies an intermediate position between the provincial 'small' cities and the capital centers of Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Can a marker of sociocultural 'contiguity' support a successful urban development?

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2. Methods

We believe that a marker of sociocultural ‘contiguity’ may play a role in a successful urban development. First, because it allows the ‘new metropolis’ to preserve its regional characteristics. Indeed, the cities we have researched are the political and administrative ‘capitals’ of their regions, districts and republics. A regional capital not only creates the centripetal forces within the region – it also serves as a symbolic representation of the region itself. Both for the external and internal observers, the region *is*, first and foremost, its capital. In this respect, a ‘new metropolis’ serves as a stereotypical ‘showcase’ of the entire region, subsuming the symbolic meanings of the ‘secondary’ cities. Characteristically, Ural is Yekaterinburg, Siberia is Novosibirsk, Volga region is Kazan, ‘Gates to Caucasus’ is Rostov-on-Don. ‘Secondary’ cities have to assume a role of ‘basis’, providing the ‘new metropolis’ with its resources: human, industrial and cultural.

On the other hand, the ‘new metropolis’ can initiate and disperse innovative meanings typical for a capital city into the urban agglomeration and an entire region. The ‘new metropolis’ is a center of the region’s intellectual and scientific life. Dynamic development of an industrial base (first in pre-revolutionary Russia and later in Soviet era) traditionally required a region to have its own intellectual elite, not dependent on the national capital. Intellectual elite emerged not only out of the regional conditions and resources; it was also fostered by the migration from the national center – a process that enriched the city’s culture. Pre-revolutionary Yekaterinburg provides a telling example: it had a so-called Ural Natural History Society (UOLE), which was the only citizen group focused on local natural history from 1880s and till the establishment of Soviet government in the Urals. UOLE members created a powerful local Ural tradition of local history, which had become an example for the subsequent generations of regional researchers. Vibrant cultural milieu of the ‘new metropolis’ produces a regional cultural ‘product’, ‘tradition’ or ‘school’. In our case, we use Yekaterinburg as an example; however, other previously mentioned cities can obviously provide their own cases. Among them are ‘regional schools’ in music (Ural rock), science (Ural school of sociology), literature (Ural school of drama), etc.

However, apart from the formal quantitative population markers, the cities of this type possess the common sociocultural features: major industry continues to play an important role in the structure of the ‘new metropolis’ economy and to influence its sociocultural life; there is a self-sufficient urban mentality (autonomous cultural

worldview); and an attempt to realize in practice the concept of a so called 24-hour city.

3. Data Analysis

The 'new metropolis' is characterized by a deep influence of its industrial structure on the city economy. For example, in modern Yekaterinburg the proportion of industry is between 31.6% and 43.2%. This sector employs about 20% of all working Yekaterinburg population (2016 data) [1, pp. 32–34]. This, in turn, determines a city's unique sociocultural style and way of life, allowing to talk about the connection between the city organization and its type of culture (in our case it's a mining culture [2]), highlighting interconnection and interdependence between the urban and the industrial spheres in Yekaterinburg throughout the three centuries of its existence. However, we can also agree with the idea that mining and industrial culture in many ways functions as one of the forms of the city's cultural memory [3].

'New metropolis' produces a relatively autonomous cultural world-picture. Sociocultural distance based on the 'we-they [everybody else]' distinction separates the residents of the 'new metropolis' from the other regions of Russian Federation both normatively and on the level of values. The idea that the city possesses a 'special way' of development and a sociocultural uniqueness is amplified, if not publicly/officially, then, even more so, unofficially, within the sphere of everyday life. Any attempts at exogenous influence – even potentially beneficial – will be received within the 'new metropolis' if not outright negatively, then with an anxious attention, or they may be hotly discussed within the city itself.

Despite the solid autonomous sociocultural foundation, the 'new metropolis' strives to become a so called 24-hour city. This concept is based on an attempt to create a model of urban life where the residents are free to fulfill their needs (vital or intellectual) around the clock. Traditional model implies that the sociocultural space of the city is limited by daylight, with the decline in residents' sociocultural and economic activity after dark. The concept of the 'city that never sleeps' provides its residents with the new consumer strategies not tied to the movements of the sun. As a result, municipal and private services have to adapt to the new conditions. All global cities are 24-cities, regardless of their geographical position.

4. Results

To conclude, the new metropolis is a certain type of urban space in Russia characterized by the following features:

1. formal (quantitative): a population of at least one million reached either during the last Soviet decade, or during the recent history of the new Russia.
2. qualitative: a considerable influence of industry on the city's economy, emergence of a relatively autonomous worldview, and a practical realization of the concept of 24-hour city.

5. Discussion

Contemporary Russia has seen an emergence of a qualitatively different (compared to a mono-functional city traditionally predominant in Russia) sociocultural type of space – a so called 'new metropolis'. 'New' here is used to highlight the fact that Russian metropolis is a transitional form between the two sociocultural types of urban conglomeration: a classical metropolis (global city) and an industrial mono-stylistic center. In practice, Russian cities of this type display the signs of ambitious and dynamic socio-economic and sociocultural development and are prepared to transmit its autonomous cultural meanings outside (both on the national and international scene).

6. Conclusions

As we have seen, the 'new metropolis' can be described as belonging to a 'contiguous' urban culture. Such 'contiguity' provides a number of socio-economic and cultural advantages. This allows the 'new metropolis' to exist as a complex synergistic system balancing between the 'native' and the 'innovative'. Such a position, on the one hand, allows a city to preserve its identity, while on the other – helps it to become an open sociocultural system not afraid of emerging challenges. However, the question of the longevity of this 'in between' position remains to be answered.

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